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THE BLUE CUP

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RADUGA
PUBLISHERS
Moscow

Translation from the Russian
Drawings by D. Dubinsky

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Голубая чашка

На английском языке

First printing 1975
Second printing 1981
Third printing 1988

©Издательство "Прогресс", 1975
English translation © Progress Publishers 1975
© Raduga Publishers 1988

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

ISBN 5-05-002177-4

I was thirty-two at the time. Marusya was twenty-nine, and Svetlana, our daughter, six and a half.

I did not get my holiday until the end of the summer, so we rented a cottage in the country outside Moscow for the last warm month of the season.

Svetlana and I had planned to go fishing and bathing, and mushrooming and nut-gathering in the woods, but we had to start by sweeping out the yard, patching up the tumbledown fence, hanging up clothes-lines, and driving in nails and spikes.

We soon got tired of it, but Marusya kept thinking up new jobs for us and for herself.

It wasn't until the afternoon of the third day that all the jobs were done at last. And just as the three of us were about to go for a walk, Marusya's friend, an Arctic airman, came to see her.

They sat out in the garden, under the cherry-trees, for a long time. Svetlana and I went to the wood shed and through sheer vexation started to make a wooden whirligig.

When it grew dark Marusya called out to Svetlana to have her milk and go to bed, while she herself went to see her airman friend off to the railway station.

I felt rather miserable without Marusya, and so did Svetlana–she did not feel like going to sleep alone in an empty house.

So we got some flour out from the pantry and made a sticky paste with boiling water.

Then we pasted the whirligig over with coloured paper, smoothed it out properly and climbed onto the roof through the dusty attic.

And there we were, sitting astride the roof. Looking down we could see a samovar smoking near the porch of the house next door. On the porch sat a lame old man with a balalaika and a crowd of children round him.

And then a bent old woman popped out of the dark entry. She shooed the children away, scolded the old man, and snatching up a rag, began to slap

the top of the samovar chimney with it to make the water boil quicker.

We laughed, thinking: you wait, a wind will start up and our whirligig will begin to spin and hum. That's when the children will come flocking to our house from all the neighbouring yards. We'll have our own company, too, then.

And tomorrow we'll think up something new again.

Maybe we'll dig a deep cave for the frog that lives in our garden near the damp cellar.

Maybe we'll ask Marusya for some thick thread and fly a kite, fly it higher than the silo tower, higher than the yellow pine trees and even higher than that hawk, who all day long had been keeping a watch in the sky on the landlady's chickens and rabbits.

Or maybe tomorrow, first thing in the morning, we'll get into a boat–I at the oars and Marusya at the rudder, with Svetlana as passenger–and we'll sail down the river to where they say a big forest stands with two hollow birches growing on the banks under which the little girl next door had found three lovely mushrooms the other day. They were wormy, though, worse luck.

All of a sudden Svetlana tugged at my sleeve.

"Look, Daddy, isn't that Mummy coming? You and I will cop it now."

Our Marusya it was, coming down the path alongside the fence. We had not expected her back so soon.

"Bend down," I said to Svetlana. "Maybe she won't spot us."

But Marusya spotted us right away. She looked up and shouted:

"What are you doing on the roof, you two? It's getting damp. And it's time Svetlana was in bed. When the cat's away the mice will play–is that it?"

"We're not playing, Marusya," I said. "We're fixing the whirligig. We shan't be long, only three more nails to drive in."

"You'll finish it tomorrow. Now get down before you make me angry," Marusya commanded.

Svetlana and I looked at each other. Hard luck, we thought. So down we climbed. But we felt sore. And although Marusya had brought a big apple from the railway station for Svetlana and a packet of tobacco for me, we felt sore all the same.

And we went to sleep, feeling sore.

The next morning brought a fresh surprise. We had just woken up when Marusya comes in and says:

"Now, you miserable wretches, you'd better own up–who broke my blue cup in the pantry?"

I didn't break it. And Svetlana says she didn't either. We looked at each other and both of us

thought how unfair it was of Marusya to blame us for something we didn't do.

But Marusya did not believe us.

"Cups," she says, "are not living things–they have no legs. They can't jump down on the floor. No one else went into the pantry yesterday except you two. You broke the cup but don't want to own up. Shame on you, comrades!"

After breakfast Marusya suddenly got up and left for town, and we sat down, looking glum.

So there goes our boating!

The sun peeped at us through the window. The sparrows hopped about on the sandy paths. The chickens scurried to and fro between the yard and the street through the wattled fence. But we felt anything but cheerful.

"Ah, well," I said to Svetlana. "You and I were chased off the roof yesterday. The empty paraffin can was taken away from us the other day. We're blamed for nothing over some blue cup or other. Call that a good life?"

"Anything but," says Svetlana. "A bad life I call it."

"I tell you what, Svetlana. Put on your pink frock. We'll take my kit-bag from behind the stove, put your apple, my tobacco, matches, a knife, and a loaf of bread into it. And we'll leave this house and follow our noses."

Svetlana digested this, then asked:

"Which way does your nose point?"

"It points, Svetlana, through the window at that yellow clearing out there, where our landlady grazes her cow. And beyond that clearing I know of a goose pond, and beyond that pond there is a water-mill, and beyond the watermill there is a birch wood on a hill. As to what's beyond that hill I don't know myself."

"All right," Svetlana agreed. "Let's take a loaf of bread and my apple, and tobacco, but also take with you a big stick, because somewhere out there lives a fierce dog, named Polkan. The boys told me that he nearly bit one of them to death."

And that is what we did. We put what we needed into my kit-bag, we shut all five windows, locked the two doors and put the key away under the doorstep.

Goodbye, Marusya! We didn't break that cup of yours all the same.

As we came out of the gate we met the milk-woman.

"Do you need any milk today?"

"No, milk-woman. We don't need anything now."

"My milk's nice and fresh, it's from my own cow," the woman said in a hurt tone. "You'll be sorry when you come back."

And she went off with a clatter of her cold milk cans. How was she to know that we were going far away and maybe would not be coming back at all!

As a matter of fact no one knew it. A sunburnt boy rode past on a bicycle. A fat man in shorts, smoking a pipe, walked past–probably going mushrooming in the woods. A blonde girl with hair wet after her dip passed by. But we did not meet anybody we knew.

We came out through the back gardens onto the clearing, which was yellow with buttercups. We took off our sandals and walked barefoot over a warm path across the meadow straight towards the watermill.

We walked on and on, and suddenly we saw a man running towards us helter-skelter from the direction of the mill. He ducked his head as he ran, and lumps of earth flew at his back from behind the broom grove.

We thought it an odd sight. What could this mean? Svetlana had sharp eyes. She stopped and said:

"I know who that is. It's the boy Sanka Karyakin, who lives next door to the house where a neighbour's pigs got into the garden after the tomatoes. Only yesterday he rode on the back of a neighbour's goat opposite our house. D'you remember?"

Sanka came running up to us, wiping his tears with the corner of a mat-bag.

"Why are you running helter-skelter, Sanka?" we asked him. "And why were those lumps of earth flying after you?"

Sanka turned his head away and said:

"Grandma sent me to the village shop to buy some salt. But Pioneer Pashka Bukamashkin is sitting at the mill and wants to give me a good hiding."

Svetlana stared at him. Well, well!

Whoever heard of such goings on in this Soviet land! Here was a man running to the village shop for salt, touching nobody, and all of a sudden, for no reason at all, somebody wanted to give him a good hiding!

"Come along with us, Sanka," she says. "Don't be afraid. We're going the same way, and we'll take your part."

The three of us went through the dense broom grove.

"There he is, Pashka Bukamashkin," Sanka said, holding back.

We looked and saw a mill. Beside the mill stood a cart. Under the cart lay a shaggy little dog all covered with burdock prickles, looking with one eye at the sprightly sparrows, who were pecking the grain scattered over the sand. On a heap of sand,

Pashka Bukamashkin sat shirtless, munching a fresh cucumber.

Pashka saw us, but did not take fright. He threw the uneaten bit of cucumber at the dog and said, without looking at anybody:

"At him, Sharik! Seize him! Here comes the famous White Guard Sanka. You wait, you mise - rable bourgeois! We'll get even with you."

Saying this, Pashka spat into the sand, a long shot. The shaggy little dog growled. The startled sparrows whirred up into a tree. Hearing such words, Svetlana and I went up closer to Pashka.

"Look here, Pashka," I said, "aren't you making a mistake?What sort of bourgeois and White Guard is he? He's just plain Sanka Karyakin, who lives next door to the house where a neighbour's pigs got into the garden after the tomatoes."

"Just the same,he's aWhite Guard," Pashka repeated doggedly. "If you don't believe me, I'll tell you all about him if you like."

Now Svetlana and I were very keen to hear all about Sanka. We sat down on a log, with Pashka opposite us, and the shaggy doggie on the grass at our feet. But Sanka didn't sit down. He retired behind the cart and sang out from there:

"You tell 'em everything then! Tell 'em how I got a whack on the back of the head. You think it doesn't hurt? Just try and give yourself one."

"There's a town somewhere in a foreign country," Pashka began calmly, "and from that town a workman, a Jew, ran away from the bourgeois. He ran away and came here, to us. And with him came a little girl, Bertha. He's working at this mill now, and Bertha plays with us. But just now she has run off to the village for milk. Well then, yesterday we were playing tipcat–I, Bertha, and this boy Sanka and another chap from the village. Bertha tipped the cat with a stick and accidentally hit this here Sanka on the back of his neck–"

"She caught me straight on the noddle," Sanka said angrily from behind the cart. "I saw stars, but she thought it funny, started laughing."

"Well, then, the cat hit this Sanka on the noddle," Pashka continued. "At first he wanted to sock Bertha, but afterwards he calmed down. He put a burdock leaf to his head and started playing with us again. Only this time he started to cheat something awful. He'd make extra steps and–"

"It's a lie!" Sanka cried, jumping out from behind the cart. "Your dog gave it a push with its muzzle, and the cat rolled forward."

"You were playing with us, not with the dog. Why didn't you put the cat back where it was. Well then, Bertha went and gave the cat such a hard whack that it went flying to the other end of the field and landed in the nettles. We thought it funny, but

Sanka didn't see the joke. Naturally, he didn't like having to run after that cat into the nettles. He scrambled over the fence and shouted from behind it: *'Doora, zhidovka!** Go back where you came from!' Bertha by this time knew that *doora* was the Russian for a fool, but she didn't know what *zhidovka* meant. She comes up to me and asks: 'What does *zhidovka* mean?' I was ashamed to tell her. I shouted: 'Shut up, Sanka!' But he shouted louder and louder on purpose. I went for him across the fence. He ran off and hid himself in the bushes. When I got back, what should I see but the stick lying in the grass and Bertha sitting in a corner on the logs. I called 'Bertha!' No answer. I went up and saw there were tears in her eyes. So she'd guessed the meaning herself. So then I picked up a stone and put it in my pocket, thinking: 'You wait, Sanka, damn you! I don't know about other countries, but in this one we'll knock the bourgeois nonsense out of you all right!'"

We looked at Sanka and thought: "Well, old chap, a pretty rotten account of you, this is. It makes ugly hearing. And to think that we intended to take your part!"

I was just about to say this, when all of a sudden the mill came to life with a loud rumble, and the rested wheel started turning in the water. A floury

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* Zhidovka – an opprobrious name for "Jewess". – *Tr.*

cat, scared out of her wits, sprang out of the mill window. Only half-awake, she missed her aim and landed on the back of the dozing Sharik. Sharik jumped up with a yelp. The cat shot up the tree and the sparrows flew onto the roof. The horse jerked his head up and gave a tug at the cart. And out of the shed peeped a hairy man, grey with meal dust, and shook a long whip threateningly at Sanka, who darted away from the cart.

"Now then... None o'your monkey-tricks. I'll box your ears for you if you're not careful!"

Svetlana started laughing. She felt a bit sorry for the unfortunate Sanka, whom everybody wanted to give a good hiding.

"Daddy," she said to me, "maybe he's not such a bourgeois after all? Maybe he's only just a fool? You *are* just a fool, aren't you, Sanka?" Svetlana said, peering kindly into his face.

Sanka's only reply was an angry snort and a toss of the head. He began to sniff, as if he wanted to say something. But what could he say, when he was guilty all round and there was nothing really he could say for himself.

At this point Pashka's doggie suddenly stopped yelping at the cat and turned towards the field, his ears pricked up.

Somewhere behind the grove a shot rang out. Then another. Then one shot after another.

"A battle nearby!" Pashka cried.

"A battle nearby," I echoed. "Those are rifle shots. Hear that rat-tat-tat? That's a machine-gun."

"Who can it be?" Svetlana asked in a sinking voice. "Has war started already?"

The first on his feet was Pashka. After him scampered the dog. I caught Svetlana up in my arms and ran towards the grove too.

We had not gone half-way when we heard a shout behind us. We turned and saw Sanka.

With hands raised high above his head to catch our attention, he raced towards us straight across the ditches and hummocks.

"Look at him, jumping like a goat!" Pashka muttered. "What's the fool waving over his head?"

"It's not a fool. He's bringing my sandals!" Svetlana cried joyfully. "I left them on the logs and he has found them and is bringing them to me. You ought to make up with him, Pashka."

Pashka scowled and did not answer. We waited for Sanka and took Svetlana's yellow sandals from him. And now all four of us together with the dog went through the grove and came out on the edge of the wood.

Before us stretched a hilly field overgrown with bushes. A goat with tinkling tin bells stood

tethered to a peg by stream, nibbling at the grass. In the sky floated a solitary hawk. And that was all. No other living soul was to be seen in that field.

"Where's the war here?" Svetlana asked impatiently.

"I'll have a look," Pashka said getting up onto a tree stump.

He stood there for quite a time, squinting against the sun and covering his eyes with his hand. God knows what he saw there, only Svetlana got tired of waiting and went to look for the war herself, struggling through the tall grass.

"The grass is too high for me and I'm too low," Svetlana complained, rising on tiptoes. "I don't see anything at all."

"Look down, mind the wire there," a loud voice came from above.

Pashka flew off the stump in a flash. Sanka leapt aside clumsily. And Svetlana ran to me and clutched my hand.

We backed away, and straight above us, hidden in the dense branches of a solitary tree, we saw the figure of a Red Army man.

His rifle hung on a bough next to him. In one hand he held a telephone receiver, while he looked without stirring through shiny black binoculars at some point at the end of the empty field.

Before we could utter a word, a volley of gunfire rolled up from somewhere in the distance with a frightful crash like a clap of angry thunder. The earth shuddered underfoot. Far out across the field a whole cloud of black dust and smoke rose into the air. The goat gave a wild jump and broke loose. And the hawk whirled in the sky, and working his wings swiftly, fled the scene.

"It's a bad lookout for the rotten bourgeois!" Pashka said loudly, glancing at Sanka. "See how our batteries work?"

"It is a bad lookout for the bourgeois," a hoarse voice repeated like an echo.

We looked, and there, next to a bush, stood a grey, bearded old man.

The old man had powerful shoulders. In his hands he held a heavy gnarled stick and at his heels stood a tall woolly-haired dog, baring its teeth at Pashka's Sharik, who had his tail between his legs.

The old man raised his broad-brimmed straw hat and bowed solemnly, first to Svetlana, then to the rest of us. Then he laid his stick down in the grass, got out a curved pipe, filled it with tobacco and lit up.

He took a long time doing it, now tamping the tobacco down with his finger, now twisting his finger in the bowl like a poker in a grate.

At last he got the pipe going, and puffed so hard at it that the soldier up in the tree started to sneeze and cough.

The battery fired a second salvo, and suddenly we saw the quiet empty field spring to life with a noise and stir. Red Army men with rifles atilt jumped out from everywhere, from behind the bushes, from behind knolls and mounds and ditches.

They ran, jumped, dropped, rose again. They came together, closed ranks, growing more and more in numbers as they ran, until at last, with loud cries, the whole vast mass bayonet-charged to the top of a sloping hill, where the cloud of dust and smoke was still reeking.

Afterwards everything grew still. From the top of the hill a signalman, looking no bigger than a toy, waved his flags. A bugle harshly sounded off. The observer in the tree climbed down, the branches snapping under his heavy boots. He patted Svetlana on the head, thrust three shiny acorns into her hand, and hurried away, rolling up the thin telephone wire on a reel.

The military drill was over.

"See that?" Pashka said to Sanka, nudging him with his elbow. "This isn't a tipcat in the neck for you. You bourgeois will have your noddles knocked off for you in no time."

"What strange talk do I hear?" said the bearded old man, stepping forward. "Have I lived to the age of sixty without gaining any sense? I am quite at sea. Here, under the hillside is our collective farm named Dawn. All round are our fields–oats, buckwheat, millet, wheat. This mill on the river is ours too. And out there, in the wood, is our big beegarden. And over all this I am the watchman. I've seen crooks and caught horse thieves in my time, but as for a single bourgeois turning up in my section–that has never yet happened under the Soviet government. Come here, Sanka, you terrible man. Let me have a look at you. Hold on, there. Stop dribbling and wipe your nose first. You're a fearsome enough sight as it is."

All this the mocking old man uttered in a leisurely way, the while he glanced curiously from under his bushy eyebrows at the pop-eyed and astonished Sanka.

"It isn't true!" Sanka wailed, deeply offended. "I'm not a bourgeois, I'm a hundred per cent Soviet. And Bertha isn't wild with me any more, she bit off over half of my apple yesterday. This Pashka here is setting all the boys onto me. He swears at me, but he tricked me out of my door-spring all right. If I'm a bourgeois, then my door-spring is bourgeois too. He went and made a rocking chair or something with it for his dog. I said to him:

'Come on, Pashka, let's make up,' but he says: 'I'll make up, but I'll give you a good hiding first.'"

"You must make up without any good hidings," Svetlana said earnestly. "You must hook your little fingers, spit on the ground and say: 'Quarrel, quarrel never, peace, peace ever.' Come on, hook fingers! And you, chief watchman, please shout at your terrible dog, tell him to leave our little Sharik alone and stop frightening him."

"Back, Polkan!" the watchman shouted. "Down, down, don't you dare touch friends!"

"Oh, so that's who he is! Polkan the fierce giant with the long tooth and hairy coat."

Svetlana, after slight hesitation, went up closer and wiggled a finger at Polkan.

"I'm a friend too. Don't you touch friends!"

Polkan looked at Svetlana. She had bright eyes, and her hands smelled of grass and flowers. He grinned and wagged his tail.

Sanka and Pashka became envious. They, too, went up closer and said: "And we are friends, too. Don't dare touch friends!"

Polkan sniffed at them suspiciously. These artful boys might smell of carrots from the kolkhoz gardens for all he knew. Just then, as if on purpose, a harum-scarum foal scampered down the path, raising a dust. Polkan sneezed and was left guessing. He

didn't touch them, but neither did he wag his tail nor let himself be stroked.

"It's time to be moving on," I said. "The sun is high, it will soon be noon. Phew, it's hot!"

"Goodbye!" Svetlana took leave of everyone in a ringing voice. "We are going far away again."

"Goodbye!" the boys, now friendly, answered in one voice. "Come and see us again from far-away."

"Goodbye," the watchman said with smiling eyes. "I don't know where you are going and what you are seeking, but I would have you know that the worst faraway for me is the left-hand side of the river where our old village graveyard stands. And the best faraway is on the right, down by the meadows and across the ravines, where they are quarrying stones. From there go through the coppice, but keep clear of the bog. There, on the shores of the lake, stretches a great big pine forest. It has mushrooms in it, and flowers, and raspberries. There on the shore stands a house. My daughter Valentina lives in that house with her son Fyodor. If you happen to pass there give them my regards."

And then the queer old man raised his hat again, whistled to the dog, puffed at his pipe, leaving a broad strip of thick smoke behind him, and strode off towards the yellow pea field.

Svetlana and I looked at each other–who wanted that sad graveyard! We took hands and turned right, towards the best of all the faraways.

We crossed the meadows and descended the ravines.

We saw men dragging sugar-white stones out of deep black holes. And not just one little stone that had been left lying about. A whole hill of them had been heaped up. And the wheels kept turning, and the barrows kept creaking. And more and more of them were piled up.

Seemingly lots of stones lay hidden underground.

Svetlana wanted to take a peep at that underground. She lay for a long time on her tummy, gazing into the black hole. And when I had pulled her back by the feet, she told me that at first she had seen nothing but darkness. And then she had made out under the ground a kind of black sea and someone in that sea was tumbling about and making a great noise. It must have been a shark fish with two tails, one in front, the other behind. And she also saw a Creepy-Crawly with three hundred and twenty-five legs. And with one golden eye. He was sitting there and roaring, was Creepy-Crawly.

I looked at Svetlana slyly, and asked her whether she had not seen there, while she was at it, a steamship with two funnels, a grey monkey up a tree and a white bear on an ice floe.

Svetlana considered this, then recollected having seen these things as well.

I wagged a finger at her–now, you're not fibbing, are you? But she only laughed and skipped away as fast as her legs could carry her.

We walked along for a long time, often stopping to rest and pick flowers. When we got tired of dragging the nosegays about with us we left them lying by the roadside.

I threw one nosegay to an old woman in a cart. She caught a fright at first, not knowing what it was, and shook a fist at us. But afterwards she smiled and dropped three big cucumbers off her cart.

We picked them up, wiped them and put them away in the kit-bag and blithely continued on our way.

We passed a little village, where lived those who plough the land, sow grain in the fields, plant potatoes, cabbages and beetroots or work in the gardens and orchards.

We also came across low green graves outside the village in which lie those who had done their sowing and tilling in this world.

We came across a tree blasted by lightning.

We ran into a herd of horses, each of them a beauty fit to join Budyonny's cavalry.

We also saw a priest in a long black garment. We

followed him with our eyes and wondered at the funny people that still remained in the world.

And then we became uneasy because the sky began to darken. Clouds gathered from all sides. They surrounded the sun, caught it and covered it up. But it kept doggedly breaking through one hole after another. At last it tore itself loose and shone over the vast world more brightly and hotly than ever.

Our grey little house with the wooden roof was left far behind.

And Marusya must have come back a long time ago. She looked, and saw no one. She searched and found no one. She must be sitting there and waiting, the silly woman!

"Daddy," said Svetlana, now utterly tired out. "Let's sit down somewhere and have something to eat."

We began to look round, and by good luck we found a glade which was the most beautiful you ever saw.

The nut grove, with a swish, flung open its luxuriant branches before us. A young silvery fir tree tapered into the sky. And sweet-scented flowers–red, blue and purple–brighter than the flags on May Day, surrounded the fir by the thousand and stood without stirring.

Even the birds did not sing over that glade–so silent was it.

Only a silly grey crow flopped down onto a bough, looked round in surprise at having landed in such a place, let out an astonished "caw... caw..." and flew off at once to her nasty dust-holes.

"Sit down, Svetlana, and look after the kit-bag while I go and fill the flask with water. Don't be afraid, only one beast lives here–the long-eared hare."

"A thousand hares wouldn't frighten me," Svetlana said bravely. "Still, don't be long."

The water was farther off than I thought and I was beginning to worry about Svetlana on my way back.

But she wasn't frightened, she wasn't crying–she was singing.

I hid behind a bush and saw chubby red-haired Svetlana standing in front of the flowers, which rose to her shoulders and lustily singing a song which she had just made up.

Hey! Hey!
We didn't break the blue cup.
Oh, no, no!
The watchman of the field keeps his watch.
But we didn't go after the carrots.
I didn't and he didn't.

But Sanka did.
Hey! Hey!
The Red Army goes in the field.
(It has come from town.)
The Red Army is the reddest.
And the white army is the whitest.
Tru-ru-ru! Tra-ta-ta!
That's the drummers,
That's the airmen,
That's the drummers flying in aeroplanes.
And I'm a drummer, I stand here.

Silently and solemnly the tall flowers heard out this song and quietly nodded their heads to Svetlana.

"Come here, drummer!" I cried, parting the bushes. "We have fresh water, red apples, white bread and yellow honey-cakes. We grudge nothing for a good song."

Svetlana felt slightly put out. She shook her head reprovingly, screwed her eyes up just like Marusya and said: "Hiding yourself and listening. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, my dear comrade!"

Suddenly she grew silent and thoughtful.

In addition, while we were eating, a grey siskin suddenly hopped down the tree and started chirruping.

He was a plucky siskin. He sat right opposite us on a branch, hopping about and chirruping, and did not fly away.

"I know that siskin," Svetlana said. "I saw him when Mummy and I were rocking in the swing in the garden. She swung me ever so high. Tweet! Tweet! What made him come all this way?"

"Oh, no!" I said firmly. "This is quite a different siskin. You are mistaken, Svetlana. That siskin has some feathers missing from his tail. The landlady's one-eyed cat tore them out. That siskin is fatter and he chirps in quite a different voice."

"No, it's the same one!" Svetlana stuck to her guns. "I know. He has come all that way after us."

"Hey, hey!" I chanted in a mournful bass. "But we didn't break the blue cup. And we have decided to go far away for ever."

The grey siskin gave an angry chirp. Not one of the million flowers so much as stirred or nodded its head. Svetlana frowned and said severely:

"You haven't got the voice. People don't sing like that. Only bears do."

We got up in silence and left the grove. As luck would have it, a cool river gleamed pale-blue under the hillside.

I lifted Svetlana up. And when she saw the sandy bank and the green islands, she forgot everything in the world and joyfully clapped her hands, crying:

"Bathe! Bathe! Bathe!"

We took a short cut to the river straight through the wet meadows.

We soon came up against dense swampy thickets. We didn't like the idea of going back, and decided to get through somehow. But the farther we went the more the bog closed in upon us.

We wandered around the bog, twisting right and left, stepping over flimsy poles and hopping from hummock to hummock. We got wet and muddy, but we just couldn't find our way out.

Somewhere quite close beyond the bushes a herd of cows could be heard moving about. The cowherd cracked his whip and a dog started barking snappishly–he must have scented us. But we saw nothing except the rust-coloured water, the rotting bushes and sedge.

Svetlana became subdued and her freckled face looked worried. She kept turning round more and more often to peer into my face with a silent rebuke, as much as to say: "What's this, Daddy? You're so big and strong, and we're in such a fix!"

"Stand here and don't move!" I ordered, placing Svetlana on a patch of dry ground.

I turned into the thickets, but there, too, there was nothing but green ooze dotted with lush marsh flowers.

I went back and saw that Svetlana wasn't standing there at all. She was gingerly making her way towards me, holding on to the bushes.

"Stay where I put you!" I said sharply.

Svetlana stopped. Her eyes began to blink and her lips quivered.

"What are you shouting for?" she said in a low faltering voice. "I am barefoot, and there are frogs there–and I'm frightened."

I felt very sorry then for Svetlana, who was in trouble because of me.

"Here, take this stick!" I shouted. "Give those nasty frogs a good walloping! But stand still. We'll soon get out of this."

I turned off into the thickets again. What the devil! Who could compare this filthy little bog with the boundless rushes of the broad Dnieper or the brooding rushland of Akhtirka, where we once caught and smashed a White Guard landing party of Wrangel's.

From hummock to hummock, from bush to bush. One–waist-deep in water. Two–the crunch of a dry asp. A punky log flew into the mud in the wake of the

asp. A rotting stump plunged in with a heavy splash. A foothold at last. Here was another puddle. And now dry land.

Parting the reeds, I found myself next to a startled goat, which had jumped up.

"Yoo-hoo! Svetlana!" I shouted. "Are you standing there?"

"Yoo-hoo!" a plaintive little voice came back from behind the thickets. "I'm standing!"

We got down to the river. We cleaned off all the mud and slime with which we were thickly covered. We rinsed our clothes, and while they lay drying in the hot sand, we bathed.

And all the fishes darted away in fear when we began to splash about in the water, laughing and raising glittering fountains.

And a black whiskered crab, whom I had dragged forth from his watery home, rolled his round eyes and wriggled and jumped about in terror. Probably this was the first time he was seeing such a glaringly bright sun, and such a glaringly ginger little girl. Anyway, he suddenly gave a twist and seized Svetlana's finger.

With a scream, Svetlana flung him right into the middle of a goose flock. The fat silly goslings scuttled away in all directions.

But up sidled a grey old gander. He had seen things more frightful than this in his time. He

cocked his head to one side, took a look with one eye, and gave the crab a peck. And that was the end of that crab.

We bathed, and dried, and dressed, and continued on our way. And again we came across all kinds of things along the road–people, and horses, and carts, and lorries, and even a grey beast–a hedgehog, which we took along with us. Only he soon started to prick our hands, so we dropped him into a cool stream.

He snorted, did that hedgehog, and swam to the other side. He must have been disgusted with us, thinking: "Those mischief-makers! Now try and find your burrow if you can!"

And then, at last, we came out to the lake.

Here ended the most outlying field of the Dawn Collective Farm, and on the other shore lay the lands of the Red Sunrise Farm.

Here, on the edge of the wood, we saw a log-built cottage and guessed at once that this was the home of the watchman's daughter Valentina and her son Fyodor.

We came up to the fence from the side where tall sunflowers, like sentinels, stood guard over the house.

On the doorstep, in the garden, stood Valentina herself. She was a tall, broad-shouldered woman, just like her father, the watchman. Her blue blouse

was open at the throat. In one hand she held a broom, in the other a wet rag.

"Fyodor!" she shouted. "What have you done with the grey saucepan, you naughty boy?"

"There!" an important voice came from under the raspberry bushes, and tow-headed son Fyodor pointed to a puddle in which floated a saucepan with a cargo of wood chips and grass.

"And where have you hidden the sieve, you scamp?"

"There!" Fyodor answered just as importantly, pointing to the sieve weighed down with a stone, under which something could be seen stirring.

"You wait, you little bandit! I'll give you a taste of this wet rag when you come in," Valentina said, and catching sight of us, she pulled down her hitched up skirt.

"Good afternoon," I said. "Your father sends you his regards."

"Thank you," Valentina answered. "Come into the garden, have a rest."

We walked through the gate and lay down under a ripe apple tree.

Fat little Fyodor had only a shirt on. His wet trousers, dirtied with clay, lay in the grass.

"I'm eating raspberries," son Fyodor gravely

informed us. "I have eaten up two bushes. I'm going to eat some more."

"I wish you good appetite," I said. "But mind you don't burst."

Fyodor stopped, poked a fist into his belly, glanced at me crossly, and picking up his trousers, waddled off towards the house.

We lay for a long time in silence. I thought that Svetlana had fallen asleep. I turned to her and saw that she wasn't sleeping at all. With bated breath, she lay staring at a silvery butterfly, which crept along the sleeve of her pink frock. And suddenly a shattering roar shook the air, and a gleaming aeroplane stormed over the tops of the quiet apple trees.

Svetlana started, the butterfly flew away, a yellow cock dropped off the fence, a startled jackdaw streaked across the sky, screaming, then all was quiet again.

"It's that airman again," Svetlana said with annoyance. "The one who came to our place yesterday."

"What makes you think so?" I asked, looking up. "Maybe it's quite a different one."

"No, it's the same one, I heard him tell Mummy yesterday that he was flying far away tomorrow and for good. I was eating a red tomato, and Mummy answered him: 'Well, goodbye. Happy journey.'

Daddy," Svetlana added, climbing onto my stomach, "tell me something about Mummy. How was it, for instance, when I wasn't here yet."

"How was it? Everything was just the same. First day, then night, then day again and night again–"

"And so for a thousand days!" Svetlana interrupted impatiently. "You tell me what happened in those days. You know yourself, you're only pretending."

"All right, I'll tell you, only get off my tummy and sit on the grass, you're squeezing all the breath out of me. Well then, listen.

"Our Marusya was seventeen at the time. The Whites attacked their town. They seized Marusya's father and put him in prison. Her mother died a long time ago, so our Marusya was left all alone in the world."

"I'm beginning to feel sorry for her," Svetlana inserted, moving closer. "Go on."

"Marusya threw a shawl over her shoulders and ran out into the street. And in the street the White soldiers were conducting working men and women to prison. The bourgeois, of course, were glad the Whites had come, and in their houses the lights were burning and music was playing. But our Marusya had nowhere to go, no one to unburden her heart to."

"O dear, I do feel so sorry for her," Svetlana interrupted impatiently. "Hurry up and get to the Reds, Daddy."

"Marusya went outside the town then. The moon was shining. A wind was blowing. And the wide steppe spread out before Marusya–"

"With wolves in it?"

"No. The wolves were scared off by the shooting. They all hid themselves in the forest. And Marusya said to herself: 'I'll run off to the town of Belgorod through the steppe. Comrade Voroshilov's Red Army is standing there. He's a very brave man, they say. If I ask him, he may help me.'

"Marusya didn't know, silly thing, that the Red Army never waits to be asked. It dashes to the rescue itself wherever the Whites attack. And the detachments of the Red Army were already moving through the steppe quite close to Marusya. And every rifle was loaded with five cartridges, every machine-gun with two-hundred and fifty.

"I was riding through the steppe at the time with a military patrol. All of a sudden a shadow appeared for a moment and instantly disappeared behind a knoll. 'Aha!' I said to myself. 'A White scout. You won't get away from me.'

"I put spurs to my horse. Bounded up that knoll. I looked, and would you believe it–there was no White scout at all. Instead, a slip of a girl stood there

under the moon. I couldn't see her face, only her hair streaming in the wind.

"I sprang off my horse, the revolver in my hand, just in case. I went up and asked: 'Who are you and what are you doing in the steppe at midnight?'

"And the moon came out big as big can be. The girl spotted the Red Army star on my cap, and she fell on my neck and started to cry.

"That's how Marusya and I got acquainted.

"By daybreak we had driven the Whites out of the town. We opened the prisons and let the workers out.

"Well, it was daytime, and I was lying in the hospital. I'd been hit in the chest a bit. And my shoulder hurt me too–I had struck a stone when I fell off my horse.

"My squadron commander comes in to me and says: 'Well, goodbye, we're moving on after the Whites. Here's a present for you from your mates–some good tobacco and paper. Lie quietly and get better quickly.'

"And so the day passed. Welcome evening! There I lay with an aching chest and a sore shoulder. Sick at heart too. You don't know how lonely it is, Svetlana, without your comrades!

"All of a sudden the door opens and Marusya comes in noiselessly and quickly on tiptoe. I was so glad that I all but cried out.

"And Marusya comes up, and sits down next to me, and puts her hand on my head, which was quite hot, and she says: 'I was looking for you all day after the battle. Does it hurt, dear?' And I said: 'Who cares if it does, Marusya. Why are you so pale?'

"And she says: 'Go to sleep. Sleep well, I'll sit by you all the days.'

"That's when Marusya and I met again and we have always lived together since then."

"Daddy," Svetlana said with emotion, "we haven't left home really and truly, have we? She loves us, you know. We'll walk around a bit and then go home again."

"How do you know she loves us? Maybe you she still loves, but not me."

"Oh, what a fibber!" Svetlana said, shaking her head. "Last night I woke up and saw Mummy put her book aside and turn towards you. She looked at you for ever so long."

"So what? She looks through the window too, she looks at everyone. She's got eyes, so she looks."

"Nothing of the sort!" Svetlana protested. "When she looks through the window her look is quite different, it's like this."

Svetlana raised her thin eyebrows, cocked her head, pressed her lips together and glanced incuriously at a passing hen.

"That's not the way people look when they love."

Svetlana's blue eyes became softly radiant, her lowered eyelashes quivered, and Marusya's dear wistful glance fell upon my face.

"You little witch!" I cried, snatching up Svetlana. "And how did you look at me yesterday when you upset the ink?"

"You turned me out of the room and turned-out people always look cross."

We didn't break the blue cup. Marusya herself may have broken something. But we had forgiven her. Who doesn't think ill of people sometimes for no good reason? Didn't Svetlana think ill of me once? And didn't I think ill of Marusya too? And so I went to the mistress of the house, Valentina, to ask her the nearest way home.

"My husband will be going to the station soon in the cart," said Valentina. "He'll drive you down to the mill, and from there it's quite near."

Returning to the garden, I met Svetlana near the doorstep, looking embarrassed.

"Daddy," she communicated in a mysterious whisper, "that son Fyodor has crawled out of the raspberry bushes and is helping himself to the honey-cakes in your kit-bag."

We went over to the apple tree, but that cunning son Fyodor, when he saw us, beat a hasty retreat

and hid himself among the burdocks growing round the fence.

"Fyodor!" I called. "Come here, don't be afraid."

The tops of the burdocks began to sway and it was clear that Fyodor was definitely retiring.

"Fyodor!" I repeated. "Come here. I want to give you all the cakes."

The burdocks stopped swaying and laboured sniffing noises came from out of the thickets.

And then a gruff voice:

"I'm standing without trousers, and there are nettles all over."

Then, like a giant striding over the forest, I stepped over the burdocks, hoisted out the ruffled Fyodor, and shook out before him all that was left in the bag.

He unhurriedly collected everything in the hem of his shirt and without so much as a "thank you" went off to the other end of the garden.

"How stuck up he is!" Svetlana remarked disapprovingly. "Goes about without trousers, like an aristocrat!"

A cart drawn by a team of two horses rolled up to the door. Valentina came out onto the doorstep.

"Make ready. They're good horses, get you there in no time."

Son Fyodor reappeared, this time in trousers, walking quickly and dragging along by the scruff of its neck a pretty smoke-coloured kitten. The kitten must have been accustomed to such handling, because it did not wriggle or mew, but just slowly wagged its bushy tail.

"There!" Fyodor said, thrusting the kitten at Svetlana.

"For keeps?" Svetlana said overjoyed, and glanced at me hesitatingly.

"Take it, if you want it," Valentina said. "We've got plenty of them around here. Fyodor! Why did you hide the honey-cakes in the cabbage beds? I saw it all through the window."

"I'll go and hide them in a better place," Fyodor reassured her and shambled off like a clumsy little bear cub.

"The spit image of his grandpa," Valentina said with a smile. "Strapping little fellow. You wouldn't believe he's only four."

We rode along a wide level road. Evening drew in. People coming from work passed by tired but cheerful.

A kolkhoz lorry rumbled by.

An army bugle sounded in the field.

A signal bell clanged in the village.

A heavy panting locomotive chugged beyond the woods. Clangkety-clank! Turn quickly, wheels,

hurry, coaches, the iron track is a long one, a far one!

Pressing the fluffy kitten close to her, happy Svetlana sang the following song to the accompaniment of the clattering cart:

Chiki-chiki!
Mice are abroad.
Abroad with tails,
Very wicked things.
They crawl all over the place.
They crawl on the shelf.
Crash-bang-bang!
Smash goes the cup.
And who's to blame?
No one's to blame.
The mice did it,
The mice out of their black holes.
Hello, moosikies!
We've come back.
And what do you think
We have come back with?
It mews,
It jumps,
And drinks milk from a saucer.
So back you go
To your black holes,
Or it will tear you

To pieces,
Into ten pieces,
Into twenty pieces,
Into a hundred million
Teeny-weeny pieces.

At the mill we jumped off the cart.

Behind the fence we could hear Pashka Bukamashkin, Sanka, Bertha and someone else playing tipcat.

"Don't you cheat!" Sanka was shouting at Bertha indignantly. "First you accuse me and now you're doing it yourself."

"Someone's cheating there again," Svetlana explained to me. "They'll be quarrelling again soon." And added with a sigh: "It's that kind of game!"

We approached the house excitedly. All we had to do was to turn the corner and walk uphill.

Suddenly we stopped and looked at each other perplexedly.

We hadn't come to the holey fence yet and the tall porch was still out of sight, but already the wooden roof of our grey little house came into view, and over it, humming away merrily, was our beautiful gleaming whirligig.

"Mummy's been on the roof herself!" Svetlana squealed, and pulled me along.

We came to the top of the hill.

The orange-coloured beams of the evening sun lighted up the porch. And there, in a red dress, bareheaded, with sandals on her bare feet, stood our Marusya, smiling.

"Smile, smile!" Svetlana gave her leave as she ran up to her. "We have forgiven you all the same."

I went up, too, and looked into Marusya's face.

Marusya had hazel eyes, and there was a tender look in them. She looked as if she had been waiting for us a long time and now was very very glad that we had come at last.

"No," I said to myself firmly as I kicked away the broken pieces of the blue cup that lay on the ground. "This was the doing of those wicked mice. We did not break it. Nor did Marusya break anything."

Then came evening. With its moon and its stars.

For a long time the three of us sat out in the garden under the ripe cherry trees, and Marusya told us where she had been, what she had been doing and what she had seen.

As for Svetlana's story, it would probably have dragged on till midnight had not Marusya suddenly bethought herself and sent her off to bed.

"Well?" artful little Svetlana said to me as she turned to go, taking with her the sleepy kitten. "Is ours a bad life now?"

We, too, got up to go in.

A golden moon shone over our garden.

A distant train rumbled northward.

A nocturnal airman droned past and disappeared into the clouds.

And life, comrades, was quite good!

Raduga Publishers